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## Notes from Calgary: Stem cell hype and medical tourism

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*CIRM's Senior Officer to the Standards Working Group, Geoff Lomax, is blogging this week from Calgary where his attending the Canadian Stem Cell Network's meeting "Stem Cell Controversies".*

The Stem Cell Network meeting Understanding Stem Cell Controversies is refreshing for its focus on clinical trials and efforts to get basic stem cell research to patients. There is no controversy over the need to develop these treatments, but the process of getting there and how those treatments are understood by the public have raised troubling issues.

Brian Kwon from the University of British Columbia provided a very nice treatment of the issues that emerge in trying to move stem cell-based therapies to the clinic. Areas he emphasized were the types of evidence required before engaging in clinical trials and the challenge of evaluating how effective the therapies were over time. Although these issues are relevant in the development of any new therapy, stem cell therapies have some additional features that need to be taken into account before they can be tested in people. One example is the need to prove absolutely that the cells are safe before trials begin.

One recurring theme among the presenters has been concerns over "stem cell hype" and "medical tourism." It was noted that patients will frequently inquire about stem cell treatments for a range of illness and injury. Speakers suggested this "hype" may be attributed, in part, to the many products incorporating stem cells (or at least suggesting on the label). Data indicate there is a growing promotion of direct-to-consumer stem cell treatments, and the claims in these promotions are not supported by scientific evidence. Tim Caulfield reported on his research indicating the average cost of an unverified, direct-to-consumer "stem cell treatment" is \$24,350.

There was recognition among the speakers of the need to provide the public with more complete information about:

- The status of cell/stem cell treatments for specific diseases
- The risks of certain interventions
- Points to consider when evaluating treatments

Independent resources like CIRM's stem cell tourism page and the International Society for Stem Cell Research website A Closer Look At Stem Cell Treatments were viewed as important counter weights to the numerous web sites promoting miracle cures to our ailments.

Here's a video CIRM produced about stem cell tourism, featuring Jeanne Loring of the Scripps Research Institute:

- Geoff Lomax

**Tags:** stem cell tourism, Loring, Lomax, Scripps

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